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# The corporeal meaning of language: A semiotic approach to musical glossolalia

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**Abstract:** A number of studies have investigated glossolalia from different points of view, dealing with its various occurrences in the religious, psychopathological, and – more recently – also poetic and musical domains. The impossibility of fully understanding such a phenomenon through a purely linguistic approach has then increasingly emerged, pointing out the need to adopt a broader perspective. However, no extensive research has been developed on musical glossolalia – and especially on its non-religious forms – from such a point of view. The present paper aims precisely at filling this gap: philosophical discussion of existing literature and the semiotic analysis of particularly relevant case studies of glossolalia in the musical domain help us shed new light on the functioning mechanisms of such a phenomenon, hence suggesting effective tools for understanding how it acquires meaning and produces sense.

**Keywords:** glossolalia, philosophy of language, semiotics, music, corporeal meaning

On dirait un bègue dans la bouche duquel les sons  
s'étouffent, se heurtent et aboutissent à une  
pantomime confuse, mais souverainement expressive.  
– Ernest Renan, *Les Apôtres*, 1866

## 1 Introduction

Literally translatable as ‘speaking in tongues’ – from Greek γλῶσσα (*glōssa*), ‘tongue,’ and λαλέω (*laléo*), ‘to talk’ – the term *glossolalia* refers to the production of speech-like syllables lacking any readily comprehended meaning, that is to say, “a meaningless but *phonologically* structured human utterance, believed by the speaker to be a real language but bearing no *systematic* resemblance to any natural language, living or dead” (Samarin 1972: 2, our emphasis).

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Although mainly associated with Pentecostalism – within which speaking in tongues plays a crucial role, both as a form of prayer and a vocal gift (i.e. the “gift of tongues,” see in particular Duffield and Van Cleave 1983; Lipford 2002) – glossolalia has also been practiced – and studied<sup>1</sup> – in a number of other religions, generally being associated with the idea of a “divine language” spoken “through” the enunciator – or, better, *announcer* (Courtine 1988a)<sup>2</sup> – of the glossolalic utterance. Psychoanalysis has then promoted a different – but nonetheless similar, as far as the idea of expressing the “voice of an Other” is concerned – conception of such a phenomenon, describing it as a symptom of mental disorders (particularly dissociative identity or multiple personality disorders) and, more generally, the manifestation of the subconscious (see in particular Cutten 1927; Kildahl 1972; Richardson 1973; for a general overview see Lippardini 2012). Moreover, Samarin (1972) and other scholars have further enlarged the domain of glossolalia, extending it to the poetic and musical dimension, within which speaking in tongues is generally described as the expression of “inspiration” and the enjoinder of “pure sound.”

Beyond the specificities of any case or category, it seems possible, from a linguistic point of view, to conceive glossolalia as a form of *trompe-l'oreille* (Certeau 1983):

Qu'il adienne en effet dans le champ religieux et la prière, qu'il résonne soudain dans l'espace clinique du délire, ou qu'il se convertisse dans la poésie d'une écriture, le « parler en langues » est un *bord* du langage. Le glossolale adresse à qui veut l'entendre le chatolement sonore de ce qu'il dit être une langue autre, divine, inspirée, exotique ou ancienne. On peut le prendre au mot et vouloir transcrire, décrire, interpréter. Mais justement, il n'y a pas de mots à prendre: ce n'est là qu'un *semblant* de langue.

[Whether it happens in the field of religion and worship, or it suddenly resounds in the clinical space of delirium, or it converts into the poetry of a writing, “speaking in tongues” is an *edge* of language. The glossolalist addresses to anyone who wants to hear him/her the sound shimmering of what he/she says in another – divine, inspired,

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<sup>1</sup> In this respect, a particular mention should be made to Felicitas D. Goodman's *A Cross-Cultural Study of Glossolalia* (Goodman 1972), which compares the use of glossolalia in various religious contexts from a linguistic but also neuro-physiological and cultural point of view.

<sup>2</sup> Courtine plays on French words to emphasise the passive role of the subject producing glossolalic utterances: “... le sentiment, exprimé par les glossolales, d'être parlé, plutôt que de parler eux-mêmes. Le glossolale occupe alors une position-limite dans l'énonciation: celle d'un sujet *annonceur*, traversé par la parole d'un Autre” [... The feeling, expressed by glossolalists, of being spoken, rather than speaking themselves. The glossolalist then occupies a liminal position in the enunciation: that of an *announcing* subject, crossed by the word of an Other'] (Courtine 1988a: 18, our emphasis).

exotic, or ancient – language. We can take him/her by his/her word and try to transcribe, describe, interpret [his utterances]. But, as a matter of fact, there are no words to take: there is only a *semblance* of language.] (Courtine 1988b: 5, our emphasis)

In fact, the rich and varied (socio-)linguistic reflection on glossolalia – from the famous analysis of the Martian language used by Catherine-Elise Müller (known as Hélène Smith) by Flournoy (1900), which also saw the collaboration of Ferdinand de Saussure, to more recent contributions such as Jakobson (1966), Samarin (1972), or Agamben (1983), just to mention some of the most incisive studies that have been made – has progressively shown the impossibility of fully understanding such a phenomenon from a purely linguistic point of view: while resembling language in some respect (since glossolalic utterances “pretend” to pertain to a certain language, thus producing effects of xenoglossia<sup>3</sup>), it differs from it because its level of expression is not related to any content plane, thus breaking the link between sound and meaning – that, according to Saussure (1916), defines the very essence of language. In other words, glossolalia creates the illusion of a linguistic form, but at the same time exceeds it.<sup>4</sup> This has lead scholars in various fields to re-consider glossolalia in a broader perspective, as well exemplified by Thomas Csordas’ *Language, Charisma, and Creativity* (Csordas 1997), which analyses such a phenomenon in light of the relationship between *logos* (‘language’) and *polis* (‘society’), and through an interdisciplinary approach based on cultural analysis, ethnographic investigation, performance theory and phenomenology.<sup>5</sup>

Nonetheless, it should be remarked that, while such an approach has been increasingly adopted in the analysis of various forms of “speaking in tongues” within the religious, psychopathological and even poetic field, no extensive research has been developed yet on musical glossolalia – and especially on its non-religious forms<sup>6</sup> – from such a point of view. The present paper aims precisely at filling this gap: the analysis of existing literature and the discussion of particularly relevant case studies of

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3 *Xenoglossia* or *xenoglossy* (sometimes also *xenolalia*) is the term used to describe someone’s ability to speak or write a language with which they are unfamiliar.

4 It is in this sense that Courtine defines it “l’image de la langue inscrite dans son excès” [‘the image of language falling under its excess’] (Courtine 1988a: 25).

5 Another interesting example is Goodman’s study (Goodman 1972), described in note 1.

6 Most studies in this field (see, for instance Andrews 1940; Best 1998; Dunn 1996; Hustad 1987; MacDonald 2000; McNeil 2005; Spencer 1990; Vaughan 2015), in fact, refer to the use of music glossolalia within the religious sphere (such as in the case of the so-called “singing in the Spirit” phenomenon). On the contrary, this paper focuses on non-religious music.

glossolalia in the musical domain help us shed new light on the functioning mechanisms of such a phenomenon, hence suggesting effective tools for understanding how it acquires meaning and produces sense.

## 2 *Vonlenska* by Sigur Rós: The instrumental use of voice ... and its multiple interpretations

*Vonlenska*, also known in English as *Hopelandic* (from the Icelandic word *Von*, meaning ‘hope’), is a constructed *a priori* language invented by the Icelandic experimental post-rock band Sigur Rós, and particularly by its frontman Jón Þór Birgisson (known as Jónsi). While resembling the phonology of the Icelandic language,<sup>7</sup> it has no established semantic content associated with its level of expression. The band defines it as “a made-up ‘language’ [which] is of course not really a language in that sense, since it is essentially just babbling vocals that fit with the music, like another instrument.”<sup>8</sup> In fact, *Vonlenska* is the non-semantic language in which Jónsi sings before lyrics are written to the vocals; and while sometimes this happens, other times the songs are recorded and performed in *Hopelandic* even in their final form.

This is the case of their 2002 album, whose official title consists of two opposing parentheses, said by the band to represent either its two parts or the idea that it has no title at all, leaving the listener free to determine it. Sometimes called *Svigaplátan* – which literally means ‘The Bracket album’ – by the members of the band and most fans, it is on the contrary officially referred to as *The Untitled Album* both in the credits of the movie *Heima* (2007) – whose soundtrack includes some of its tracks – and critics in general. To further enhance the idea of indeterminateness suggested by these elements, the band decided to leave the pages of the album’s booklet blank, thus inviting listeners to interpret their own meanings of the songs it contains and illustrate its pages with their own words or drawings. Also the outside packaging of the album, which consists in a plastic protective sleeve with two parentheses cut out, revealing the

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7 Such a phonological resemblance, together with the band’s choice of adopting an official name for their language, is what, according to Ethan Hayden, makes *Hopelandic* “tread a line between xenoglossia and echolalia: sounds that mimic an alien space, an otherworldly tongue aurally mimicking the qualities of the world from which it originates” (Hayden 2014: 52). Nonetheless, its intrinsic “impossible nature”, makes the author finally ascribe *Vonlenska* to glossolalia: “*Hopelandic* forces language to deny itself, to refuse its nature. It disrupts the fundamental workings of language” (Hayden 2014: 55).

8 <https://sigur-ros.co.uk/band/disco/parenth.php>.

image printed on the CD case underneath, is very interesting: four versions of such a cover were created – using modified pictures of nature around the band’s studio – depending on where it has been sold (Europe, the US, Australia, and Japan), while in Iceland all four cover designs have been released.

As a result, the basic idea underlining this text and its contextual elements is that there is no established meaning associated with them, but each interpreter is called to push his or her own inferences forward by singing, illustrating, and even calling such an album the way they want to. In other words, the album is presented as a sort of unfinished, highly collaborative – we might say “open,” in Eco’s terms (see in particular Eco 1989)<sup>9</sup> – work, through an “aesthetic of invisibility” (Hayden 2014: 51) that makes the author (i.e. Sigur Rós) fade into the background and the reader (i.e. the audience) become more visible.

Accordingly, if we listen to the first track of the album, “untitled #1” (a.k.a. *vaka*), and use one of the very common platforms intended for users to search and share lyrics, such as Musixmatch, we are told that

This song has no meaning. The singer says random fantasy words (there is no translation), so only you can give a meaning. It’s like listen[ing] to music in [an]other language and translat[ing] as you want to. The Entire album is that way, the meaning is personal.<sup>10</sup>

Even phonologically transcribing and analyzing the song would not help reveal its meaning: the attempt made by Hayden (2014: 16–22), for instance, interestingly allows identifying a limited number of recurring syllables, also (partially) describing the rules regulating consonant and vowel combinations, but cannot help say much more than this. On the contrary, it is likely to lead to deceptive conclusions: although – as Hayden (2014: 49–50) remarks – the repetition of syllables suggests a loss of importance of the voice in favor of the melody, the former plays in fact a crucial role in the reception and interpretation of the song by the audience.

Indeed, it is not uncommon to chance upon a series of online versions of the lyrics (and interpretations) of this song. On Song Meanings, for instance, various users debate on the correctness of the suggested lyrics and even on the acceptability of the idea of making personal interpretations public:

*Vaka* means awakening in old Norse [which is true, although the title *Vaka* is just an informal one, used by Sigur Rós to distinguish this track from the others and simply chosen after the name of the drummer’s daughter, without any reference to its semantic denotation, our note]. The band sing[s] in a made up language comprised of a fusion of English and

<sup>9</sup> Such an issue will be covered more in detail below, also introducing Eco’s idea of “works in movement.”

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.musixmatch.com/lyrics/Sigur-Rós/Untitled-1>.

Icelandic [which is not correct, since Hopelandic does not include any English or Icelandic word, as we remarked above, our note]. ... You tend to hear your own words in the lyrics based on your state of mind. The person that posted the original translation must have been feeling pretty low when they wrote what they wrote! To me it sounds as though he's singing 'You shine on us, you shine on all of us'. That ties into the awakening theme a little now that I think about it.<sup>11</sup>

By contrast, another user supports that:

This song (and the entire album) doesn't have any lyrics. At least not the English words that somebody wrote. It's all just sounds, gibberish, and while a lot of people seem to hear English words, you don't have to. You can just hear the song as it is in itself without bothering with language.<sup>12</sup>

Still other users post their own interpretations, and – what is very interesting – relate them to their emotions and feelings, which are said to highly influence the understanding of the lyrics and so the meanings associated with the song.

The same applies to a YouTube page dedicated to untitled #1, where users post their interpretations, with one suggesting that “each time [Hopelandic] sound[s] like something different, sometimes it sound[s] like pure beautiful emotion, [with] no words [at all].”<sup>13</sup> Another user reiterates that Vonlenska has “no semantic meaning, so [yo]u can interpret whatever you want into these songs,”<sup>14</sup> and one also ironically describes it as a sort of primordial language arising before proper language is learnt: “Hopelandic is my native language but unfortunately as I got older I learned English and now I can't speak a word of it. My daughter speaks it and I hope she doesn't forget.” This interestingly recalls Kristeva's (1980: 133–134) description of language as a combination of two opposite elements: the *symbolic* and the *semiotic*. While the former is the structured realm of denotative meaning, the latter represents the domain of instinctual drives, which find expression in language through rhythm, intonation, timbre, and other sonic aspects. Although both modes are always present in any utterance, there are discourses attempting to reduce as much as possible the semiotic component (as it generally happens when scientific language is employed) and discourses rather trying to magnify it (such as in poetic and musical language). However, according to the Bulgarian-French philosopher and psychoanalyst, purely semiotic utterances are possible only in the the

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<sup>11</sup> Comment left by “Vladimirdave” on 9 September 2013, <https://songmeanings.com/songs/view/3530822107858789903/>.

<sup>12</sup> Comment left by “ximo” on 22 December 2014, <https://songmeanings.com/songs/view/3530822107858789903/>.

<sup>13</sup> Comment left by “xxxscrubsxx” in 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AfrQdGL-8bU>.

<sup>14</sup> Comment left by “oppenhe1mer” in 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AfrQdGL-8bU>.

early stages of human development, before the phonetic, syntactical and semantic restrictions of language inhibit the indistinction characterizing the “semiotic chora” (Kristeva 1984 [1974]).

Again, then, several posts concern emotions: “more than words can say,”<sup>15</sup> “I think I never felt so sad before,”<sup>16</sup> “can[']t help but cry because of no reasons when [I] hear the sound”<sup>17</sup>; and even a real mixture of feelings: “It’s funny how you can feel so much emotion, within the 7 minutes that this beautiful song plays. [H]ate, sadness, depression, loneliness, joy, thrill, love. [A]ll this in one song.”<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, on another YouTube page very creative interpretations of the song are provided, and curious explanations are sometimes used to support them (such as when “curseofverse1287” writes “Luckily, my parents speak Slovak, and some of his lyrics are in Polish,”<sup>19</sup> which is not true at all). Once more, then, the influence of contextual elements on interpretation is pointed out: “I think it’s saying suffering instead of saw fire but that’s mostly because the first time I heard of this ... song, it was on such a sad video about an abused boy named Jeffrey Baldwin. Heartbreaking.”<sup>20</sup>

These examples effectively show us that, if on the one hand, the textual and contextual elements released by Sigur Rós seem to suggest that all kinds of interpretations are possible and in principle equivalent to each other, on the other hand the *use* (see Eco 1990; Eco et al. 1992) of the text by different users tend to impose some interpretations over others, in an unceasing *battle*<sup>21</sup> among different interpreters and, above all, between them and the text itself. In fact, according to Hayden, Sigur Ros’ album is based on an implicit impossibility:

The album is left incomplete, but it cannot be completed. Hopelandic actively resists signification, and as a result, the space between the parentheses cannot ever be filled ... In the end, all that we are left with is the excess of non-semanticity (Hayden 2014: 55).

Nonetheless, such a lack of semanticity tends to be perceived as an extension of hermeneutic possibilities to their extremes, recalling Eco’s (1989) idea of

15 Comment left by “Alexji Stream” in 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AfrQdGL-8bU>.

16 Comment left by “brunconcrete” in 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AfrQdGL-8bU>.

17 Comment left by “britpopok” in 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AfrQdGL-8bU>.

18 Comment left by “Maddy Holmes” in 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AfrQdGL-8bU>.

19 Comment left in 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zIOxf0D9sQ>.

20 Comment left by Jennycism in 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zIOxf0D9sQ>.

21 The metaphor of battle is here used to contrast the idea of a fruitful hermeneutical cooperation between the text and the reader described by Eco (1979).



“works in movement.” This leads, for instance, to the audience’s choice of neglecting any reference to Icelandic phonetics, as the definition of Hopelandic would require, rather adopting English<sup>22</sup> – i.e. the language mostly used by the biggest community of interpreters discussing about the song through the Internet – for writing the lyrics. An “interlingual translation” (Jakobson 1959) between the glossolalic utterances of Hopelandic and a codified language therefore takes place, resulting in an evident contradiction: although resembling each other in some respect on the level of the signifier (in Saussurian terms [Saussure 1916], the *image acoustique* or “sound-image,” which corresponds to the abstract class encompassing all the possible pronunciations that the interpreters of a same semiosphere would associate to the considered arrays of letters), such interpretations visibly differ on the level of the signified.

Thus, if Sigur Rós had to include a text in the booklet of their album, they could perhaps have opted for a phonetic transcription of their song, describing its level of expression. However, such a solution would have not probably satisfied users as regards to the search of a meaning of this song, since it would only help describe the level of the signifier. Nor it would have satisfied the authors’ intention, since they adopted Hopelandic precisely as a way to emphasize the phonological and emotive qualities of the human voice, and so decided not to add any written text on their album’s booklet.

This immediately recalls Paul Zumthor’s reflections on the “purified sound”:

From its initial outburst poetry [in our case, music] aspires, like an ideal term, to purify itself from semantic constraints, to get outside language, ahead of a fullness where everything that is not simple presence would be abolished. Writing occults or represses this aspiration (Zumthor 1990 [1983]: 128).

Orality, by contrast, welcomes it and gives it expression by means of nonsense sentences, repetitions accumulated to the point that meaning is exhausted, pure vocalisms, or – as in the above considered case, with Sigur Rós interestingly avoiding any written form – with non-lexical phonic sequences lacking any semantic correspondence.

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<sup>22</sup> This is made possible by the – partial, but anyway existing – proximity between the phonological structures of the considered systems: although certain qualities of glossolalia extend across linguistic boundaries (see Goodman 1972), most glossolalic expressions share structural and phonological characteristics with the glossolalists’ mother tongues (see Samarin 1972), or at least – as in this case – with the linguistic branch to which such tongues pertain.

### 3 Not an isolated case: Further examples of “singing in tongues”

Although representative of musical glossolalia, Sigur Rós’ Vonlenska is not its only occurrence. Similar examples include scat singing in jazz, which consists in vocal improvisation with nonsense syllables or without words at all. Exactly as in the case of Hopelandic, the voice is used as an instrument by scat singers: syllables are chosen in order to influence the pitch articulation and the resonance of the performance, also emphasizing the performer’s personal style – with some artists opting for soft-tongued sounds and liquids, such as Betty Carter, while others preferring fricatives, plosives and open vowels, such as Louis Armstrong’s “Heebie Jeebies” (1926), which is generally cited as the first song employing scatting, even though there are earlier examples.

Another example is the Gaelic *puirt à beul* (literally meaning ‘tune from a mouth,’ and also called *diddling*, *jigging*, *mouth music*, *chin* or *cheek music* in English), which is widely used in traditional Scottish and Irish folk music and includes both bawdy lyrics and meaningless syllables, which are meant to replicate the rhythm of dance tunes and to evoke the typical sound of bagpipes.<sup>23</sup> *Puirt à beul* has also been adopted by well-known singers and bands, such as the Cocteau Twins from Scotland or the Quadriga Consort from Austria, whose performances greatly emphasize the role of the singers’ voice.<sup>24</sup>

Several other examples, such as *joik* or *yoik*, a traditional form of song of the Sami people of the Nordic countries and Kola peninsula of Russia, which is meant to mimic the sounds of nature or sometimes to evoke a person, or the Tuvan *khoomie* or “throat singing,” and various other forms of vocal music that seem somehow comparable with traditional shamanistic chanting, could be also be added to this list.

It should also be noted that there have been several interesting avant-garde experiments in the field of musical glossolalia: a very interesting example is that of Meredith Monk, whose rich production includes both songs (such as “Lullaby,” 1981) where the singer’s voice is used as a melodic medium, thus bypassing the linguistic dimension, and tracks (such as “Insect,” 1979) with a rather imitative, almost onomatopoeic nature. A mention should be made also to Demetrio Stratos’ album “Cantare la voce” (1978), whose cover – representing a man with two mouths: one, closed, commonly placed within his face; the other,

<sup>23</sup> An emblematic case of mouth music is the song “Brochan Lom,” whose “lyrics” vary in different traditions.

<sup>24</sup> See, for instance, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ovhNIBnH9es>.

open in order to emit sounds, placed in correspondence with his throat – interestingly refers to phonation rather than to the production of actual words, anticipating its contents, that is to say, a series of vocalisms and sound articulations not corresponding to any word. The title itself (literally “Singing the voice”) is also very interesting, since it recalls Aristotle’s discussion on both the *phoné*, literally the ‘voice’ (that men share with animals in general) and the *logos*, namely the ‘word’, or ‘speech’ (which has been seen as pertaining exclusively to human beings) as tools of expression and communication.

A more structured case is *Kobaïan*, a lyrical language created by the French drummer and composer Christian Vander for his progressive rock band Magma. The band’s first album, “Magma” (1970), tells the story of a group of refugees fleeing from the Earth to a fictional planet (called Kobaïa, which explains the name chosen for such an invented language). The composer, who also has a Kobaïan name, said in an interview that he invented such a language (which is mainly based on elements of Slavic and Germanic languages) because “French wasn’t expressive enough for the sound of the music [he] had in [his] head” (in Culshaw 2009). Thus, due to the unsuitability of natural languages, he created a constructed language able to match the music, mainly focusing on the phonetic level. Indeed, the reception of the album reflected such an idea: the music critic Ian MacDonald, for instance, wrote that

Kobaïan is *basically phonetic* not semantic, [since it is] based on sonorities *not on applied meanings*. It was incorporated gradually into Magma’s music, by *improvisation*. Glau, for instance, means blood and should convey the implication of some thick, glutinous liquid. Say it aloud and see; it works (MacDonald 1975, our emphasis).

Accordingly, the lyrics on Magma’s albums generally have no translation, and only clues to the unfolding story of Kobaïa are provided in French in the albums’ liner notes. However, unofficial Kobaïan online glossaries have been gradually developed by the band’s fans. Furthermore, according to Hayden (2014: 36–38), the phonological characterization of Kobaïan echoes the percussive and almost militarist sound of Magma’s music, suggesting specific historical and cultural connotations.<sup>25</sup>

Before moving to the conclusion, we would like to briefly consider a final interesting case of constructed musical language: the so-called *Eaiea* devised by Bruce Koestener in 1990, “designed – in his words – to allow musical instruments ...

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<sup>25</sup> This leads Hayden (2014: 36–38) to describe Kobaïan as a “quasi-onomatopoeic nonsensical xenoglossia” simulating a fictive language. However, provided its improvised and phonetic characterisation, together with the uncontrolled and only subsequent creation of glossaries by the audience, we claim it would be better ascribed to glossolalia.

to *speak words* through combinations of pitches, and also to let singers speak two languages simultaneously.”<sup>26</sup>

Koestener illustrates his language’s basic rules, which combine specific letters with musical pitches, therefore operating on the mere expression level, with a sort of “intersemiotic translation” (Jakobson 1959) between a “Code 1,” i.e. the Latin alphabet, and a “Code 2,” i.e. musical letter notation. But the process does not stop here, since the composer’s rules also combine such a system of letters and notations with a set of semantic categories (such as people, other living things, elements, numbers, feelings, senses, etc.). This, in turn, allows Koestener to further move toward an “interlingual translation,” with the creation of a real glossary made of entries relating the different Eaiea arrays of letters to English words, therefore responding to his main aim of “speaking words” through music.

## 4 Analyzing musical glossolalia: An attempt of taxonomy

After this varied overview – which only aimed at being representative of different types of musical glossolalia, and could be certainly extended and further developed –, we would like to present some general thoughts deriving from the discussed cases, therefore responding to the main aim of this paper.

First of all, we could attempt a taxonomic analysis. Based on the considered examples, in fact, it would be possible to distinguish among:

1. “Mimetic” or “onomatopoeic invented musical languages”<sup>27</sup> (such as joik, khoomei, other forms of musical glossolalia resembling shamanistic chanting, and the vocalisms by Monk in *Insect*), which imitate nature, thus falling into the category that Hayden (2014) calls “echolalia”;
2. “Instrumentalizing invented musical languages,” which rather use the voice as a melodic medium, and can be in turn divided into different sub-categories:
  - 2a. Languages imitating music itself (i.e. trying to replicate instruments, tunes, melodies, etc.), such as the experimenting vocalisms by Monk in Lullaby, Stratos’ “Cantare la voce” and, partially, also puirt à beul;

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.eaiea.com> (our emphasis).

<sup>27</sup> The adoption of the word “languages” in the description of these forms of musical glossolalia is intentional and refers to the main conclusion of this paper (see below).

- 2b. Languages recurring to improvisation of syllables aiming at influencing the pitch articulation and the resonance of the performance, also emphasizing the singers' personal styles, such as scat singing in vocal jazz and *puirt à beul*;
- 2c. more structured phonetic languages, such as Sigur Ros' *Vonlenska*.

Although all of these languages lack any semantic characterization, they are evidently connected to specific semiospheres, mainly due to their mimetic nature (either they imitate nature, musical instruments, or the phonology of a specific natural language) since, from Peirce on, we know that similarity is itself a cultural construct. This is certainly an important first level of signification and production of sense, even though it is generally neglected.

In order to complete the description of this tentative taxonomy, we should also outline the presence of a last category:

- 3. "Semantics-enriched invented musical languages," which, however, generally originate *only* at a later stage, as the result of the intervention of a community of interpreters on a phonetic language (as we analyzed in the case of Magma's *Kobaian*, and might also be argued in relation to the transcription of Sigur Ros' songs by their fans), therefore stressing the *necessary* and *primary* character of the phonetic function.

Finally, the research only pointed out a sort of "cross-category" case, that is to say, the *Eaiea*, which, rather than a proper language, could be better described as a real act of multi-layered intersemiotic translation allowing an interlingual translation and so the passage to the semantic dimension.

Even though such a taxonomic operation<sup>28</sup> is surely useful and helps reveal some initial interesting elements on musical glossolalia, it does not allow us to fully understand its functioning mechanisms, nor the ways by which it acquires meaning and produces sense. In order to do so, it is worthwhile, first of all, adopting a broader perspective, reconsidering the analyzed invented musical languages in the framework of communication processes: do such languages communicate? If so, how? And what can be said about them from the point of view of communicative processes? We will deal with such issues in the following paragraph.

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**28** Which is not an isolated attempt. Alternative typologies referred to musical glossolalia can be found, for instance, in Hayden (2014) and Marino (2014).

## 5 Analyzing musical glossolalia: Communicative processes, semiotics, and corporeality

Regardless of specific occurrences or analytical perspectives, glossolalia seems to be characterized by a basic tension between *impenetrability* and *universality*: on the one hand, it represents a sort of inner, unknown and somehow “hidden” language, which cannot be understood by others – and precisely for this reason has been related to inspiration. On the other hand, in all of its forms, speaking in tongues is endowed with a strong *performative* charge, which originates a sort of “contagion” that makes it “universal,” since it is able to spread from an alterity (be it God, the whisper of inspiration, our unconscious, or whatever we might want to make it correspond to) to a speaker (*vertical channel*) and from the latter to a community of listeners (*horizontal channel*), who end up inevitably transformed by such an act, as the above considered example of Sigur Rós’ Vönduská effectively shows. Albeit not denotative, glossolalia certainly is *communicative* and has a great emotive impact. After all, as we pointed out in the analysis of Stratos’ “Cantare la voce,” since classical philosophy, the role of the voice (*phoné*) in communication has been outlined. And already Jakobson, while defining glossolalia as a “a special kind of verbal or quasi-verbal creative activity,” pointed out that it is “totally deprived of a sense-discriminative role [...], but nonetheless *destined for a certain kind of communication*” (Jakobson and Waugh 1979: 214, our emphasis).

Since we are dealing with a form of communication, then, let us analyze it by means of Jakobson’s model (Jakobson 1964 [1960]), which is one of the most effective tools to be used in this field. There is no doubt that the *metalinguistic* and *referential* functions are here denied, since the code is by definition unintelligible and does not speak of itself, nor of any referential communicative context. By contrast, the analyzed examples point out a predominance of the *poetic* function: although unintelligible, the message (and, more specifically, its phonetic configuration) is at the centre of the glossolalic act and, through both the vertical and horizontal channels we described above, allows a real “contagion” based on emotions – once more, the case of Sigur Rós is emblematic in this sense. This, in turn, allows making interesting observations as regards to the singer – or sender – (*expressive* function) and the audience – or receiver – (*conative* function). The former literally disappears, becoming a mere channel (of God, intuition, etc.): according to Allen S. Weiss, in fact,

Glossolalic utterances ... permit no differentiation between the subject of the utterance and the subject of the statement, no real determination of the subject. It is for this very reason

that such speech acts may be deemed of divine [or, in the here considered case, musical] inspiration: if the subject cannot be located as a function of the enunciation, then the origin of the enunciation cannot be linguistically determined. (Weiss 1989: 119)

On the contrary, the conative function seems to acquire importance precisely due to the lacking of semantic elements, as if the inevitable emotive contagion – a sort of “aesthetic grasp,” we would say adopting Landowski’s (2004) terms – supposed by the glossolalic speech relied precisely on its unintelligibility.

These observations bring us back to the problem of the linguistic analysis of glossolalia: while resembling human language in some respect (as noted by Goodman, Samarin, and other scholars), it strongly differs from it since it represents an act aiming at saying something *prior* and *independently* from any linguistic realization. In Michel de Certeau’s words: “Th[e] valorization of sound seeds an oral transgression through the semantic organization of the discourse, a transgression which displaces or cuts the articulated meanings and which renders the signifier autonomous in relation to the signified” (Certeau 1986: 53).

This in turn recalls the Lacanian idea of the “primacy of the signifier” (see Lacan and Marie 1966, 1981), which, in our opinion, is one of the most effective tools that can help understand how musical glossolalia produces sense: contrary to classical understanding (especially as exemplified by Saussurian semiology, which categorically isolates the voice from language, excluding it from any possibility of making sense<sup>29</sup>), signifiers do not assume significance in relation to signifieds, but rather in concern to other signifiers. The signified, in fact, is seen by Lacan as a mere effect of the signifier, which does not refer to a thing in reality, but always refers to another signifier, with the signified – or, better, the “illusion” of a signified – inevitably vanishing.

It is in this sense that we can interpret de Certeau’s words (Certeau 2015) when he states that, in glossolalia, the word reaches the limits of insignificance, becoming *lacrima rerum*. Such an idea in turn matches Compagnon’s reflections (Compagnon 1979), according to which glossolalia is the opposite of signs, since it gives expression to reality before and independently from any attempt of forcing it into a form – which, by contrast, inevitably alters reality, as a dominant position in the philosophy of language supports.

Furthermore, the idea of the primacy of the signifier casts light on another crucial aspect of glossolalia: “escaping” from the semantic dimension, speaking – or, in

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<sup>29</sup> “Consider, for example, the production of sounds necessary for speaking. The vocal organs are as external to language as are the electrical devices used in transmitting the Morse code to the code itself; and phonation, i.e. the execution of sound-images, in no way affects the system itself” (Saussure 1966: 18).

our specific case, “singing” – in tongues is able to restore the vocal – in de Certeau’s terms (Agamben 1983, Certeau 2015), *corporeal*<sup>30</sup> – materiality of language, not only as regards to the speaker,<sup>31</sup> but also – and more importantly – to the listener, through whose body its “miraculous” emotive contagion can take place. Hence, overcoming any attempt of a purely linguistic analysis (which seems inevitably destined to fail, or at least to only partially succeed), glossolalia needs to be conceived and studied as a real *semiotic* phenomenon,<sup>32</sup> that is to say, as a human behavior that makes sense by means of the combination of different levels (such as the use of the voice, but also the gaze, gestures, and a series of other paralinguistic factors) and, even more importantly through the above mentioned “aesthetic grasp” that reminds us of a too often neglected element participating in – and, indeed, allowing – each of our communicative acts: our very *body*.

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**30** The reference to corporeality is also present in Csordas, who, drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, describes glossolalia as a phenomenon of *embodiment* revealing the language as “incarnate”: “Glossolalia, by its formal characteristic of eliminating the semantic level of linguistic structure, highlights precisely the existential reality of intelligent bodies inhabiting a meaningful world” (Csordas 1997: 238).

**31** As well described by Courtine, whose work echoes de Certeau’s reflections: “En s’évadant du sens, elles retrouvent cette dimension essentielle de la langue pour un sujet: la sensation intérieure, irrémédiablement singulière, qu’une langue est parlée, et que le corps résonne des bruissements de la voix.” [“By escaping from meaning, they (i.e. glossolalic utterances) recover this essential dimension of language for a subject: the interior, irremediably singular, feeling that a language is spoken, and that the body resounds with the rustle of the voice.”] (Courtine 1988a: 9).

**32** In this respect, see also Leone (2008).



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